

Review of a Recent Speech

"Records Preservation in the USSR"

by Genadii A. Belov, Director General of Archives, Moscow

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1. The Director General of the USSR Archives in Moscow had surprisingly little propaganda in his talk other than in his opening and closing sentences, and these were not as flamboyant as expected. On the other hand he included considerable information about the Soviet archive buildings and operations not previously available.

2. Interestingly, the Director General started by saying the Soviet state always has paid attention to its history and culture but its archival problems differ from those in foreign archives, consequently the Russians have to create their own archives schools, management, and solutions. Then he listed and explained several of their problems and solutions, every one of which is identical to those cited in reports from the Americas and the rest of the world. But he did state the Soviets "have never refused to employ positive experience from the development of foreign archives".

3. The problems he lists are primarily of concern in the selection, protection, and permanent storage of documents of enduring archival value, but all these operations and facilities are so interrelated with the managing, storing, and retrieving of temporary records that the detailed Russian experience is well worth study by Western Records Managers.

4. The Russian Archivist explains that their work requires the use of many sciences and humanities to preserve documents. He cites his problems as:

- (a) Archives construction and equipment
- (b) Long range restoration and preservation
- (c) Methods to restore faded texts
- (d) Protecting documents from polluted air and harmful light
- (e) Introducing Archival microfilming
- (f) Introducing modern operations, restoration, and microfilming

5. The historical background of their program since 1917 was discussed. At first they had only 20 small archives buildings attached to certain government departments. Now there is a network of 3,000 in the USSR. He mentions "several hundred thousand lesser archives" which I believe must be local libraries, central files, and interim records storage staging areas in various government organizations. These are similar to Systems in American Federal and State Governments.

6. He stated that by 1950 they had in Moscow the "Central State Archives for Ancient Documents" with 29 Kilometers of shelves and by 1960 they had eight more buildings with 134 kilometers of shelving. (To establish a perspective we can convert 29 kilometers to some 95,000 feet and the 134 to 440,000 feet. Further we should recall the U. S. National Archives built in 1935 has 900,000 cu. ft. of storage shelves.)

7. The Moscow Director General said that since 1957 they built throughout Russia 100 new archival buildings "with a capacity of 1,600 kilometers of shelving". (Some five and a quarter million feet.) (In the U. S. the GSA has 10.8 million cubic feet of records in 16 Records Center plus the National Archives.) Mr. Belov went on to explain their standard building plans which provide areas for processing work, research, methods studies, microfilming, and disinfection. At present they use standard (library-type) shelves that are stationary, metal, and double faced. The new construction is designed for movable "Kompaktus" shelves. (An Australian firm using the same shelf-on-wheels principle as the Japanese "Elecompact". Japan has now franchised this in the U. S. as "Estey Elecompact" by the Estey Corporation in Red Bank, New Jersey.)

8. The archive buildings in USSR are divided into the storage area with adjoining administration and research areas for patrons. There is hot water heat in the administrative area and air conditioning in the stacks. Film archives are fire-wall compartmented with alarms and valves for fire extinguishing gases. Film archives have better equipment than document storage units. Film archives require skilled servicing. Three large scientific institutes are developing strict methods and materials for document restoration and processing.

9. The Russian archives have accumulated large quantities of documents of poor physical quality that cannot last. These are being restored through designated official laboratory procedures and materials.

10. About half of the Director's talk dealt with his problems related to document microfilming and its storage and use. They have set up 102 restoration workshops and microfilm laboratories. Their policies for their widespread archival microfilming are:

- (a) Creation of insurance copies of unique documents.
- (b) To improve Soviet collections with film copies from abroad and by exchanging microfilms among foreign archives.
- (c) Broaden the use of documents by using copies rather than originals.
- (d) Publishing document collections in microfilm form.
- (e) Substitute microfilm copies for certain original documents.

11. The Russian Archivist then cited a page-full of reasons for not microfilming and these are summarized as follows:

The advantage of storing microfilm in archives in place of paper appears to be quite groundless. Therefore, the approach to microfilming needs to be highly cautious. There cannot be talk of massive destruction of originals after microfilming. Practical experience has shown that microfilming documents by single frames costs considerably more than construction of buildings for storage of the original document. Using assembly-line cameras in archival operations runs up against the impossibility of photographing bound and stitched material, oversize documents, and records of different color, size, thickness, and text contrast. Microcopying does not convey all the external peculiarities of the original (paper texture, ink color, water marks, etc.). There is a technical limit to some text reductions. Reading microfilm is much more tiring and objectionable to researchers. Also, unless there is special cross referencing, a number of exceptionally strict, difficult to employ requirements for systemization, and the microcopying of originals under scientific and technical processing a number of documents will be "buried" forever among countless rolls of film. It is not clear which deposited materials should be microfilmed even though they have already cost special, expensive, and labor-consuming processing. The microfilming of materials to be stored for a short time has no meaning, but microfilming materials to be stored or used continuously for a long period of time can lead to irreparable losses.

12. Mr. Belöv then listed these five positive actions they are taking to solve the shelving problem caused by millions of new files created each year:

- (a) Construction of a number of new depositories.
- (b) More rational and economic assignment of storage space.
- (c) Consideration of new techniques.
- (d) Increased analysis by experts of the worth of documents.
(Changing some permanent records to temporary and shortening the storage of certain temporary records.)
- (e) Limiting direct accessions from subsidiary units.

13. The Russian Archivist concluded by reminding Archivists of the fact that the mass of documentation generated and deposited is beyond the present forces of historians and will be beyond the increased abilities and demands of future scientists and historians.

14. He said Soviet archivists are solving complex problems and using new scientific, engineering, and technical achievements. They, as custodians of the documentary wealth of the Soviet people, will successfully preserve and strengthen peace in all the world. "Peace for peoples, peace for progress, peace for the flourishing of science and culture, peace for archives, and the voice of peoples for the defense of peace must constantly sound the alarm."